

*Alain Spitzer, January 10, 2016*

### **Finding lost sheep**

#### *The Parable of the Lost Sheep*

*“15 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”*

*3 Then Jesus told them this parable: 4 “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? 5 And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders 6 and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ 7 I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”*

Most of us have been lost sheep at some point in our lives. Most of us will find our way back to our flock either on our own or more often with the help of those who care for us. Our lives are generally filled with shepherds who lead us to safety when danger lurks nearby. For many other people the shepherds are nowhere to be found, and their time on this earth is filled with sorrow and heartbreak.

Over the years I have learned that more often than not those who lose their way have not wandered away from the flock, but have been pushed away by unhealthy communities that are silent and inactive when those who are lost need them most. Over time they are exiled into devastating poverty and into the greater realm of universal injustice and inequality.

Lost sheep are not very difficult to find ; our communities are filled with them and every year their numbers grow.

Last week I lost 2 old friends that had made St-James (the community I have been part for over a decade) their home. Both were lost sheep that had found their way to St-James over a decade ago. Both made their way through life begging for whatever scraps our society had left to give to them. They had always depended on us to get through long winter months when the weather was cold and resources scarce.

One of the two, Patrick, was the son of Haitian refugees who made their way to Canada 40 years ago; very quickly in his teenage years he got involved with street

gangs and by his early twenties was serving a prison sentence after killing two other gang members in a drug deal gone wrong. By the time he got out of prison he simply could not forgive himself for what he had done, and ended up on the street stuck in addiction.

One day two of my staff found him unconscious in a snow bank beside the parking lot of the Church where we were located and brought him inside. In the 10 years that followed I got to know him very well and journeyed alongside him as he tried to get his life back together. We had some good days, and other days that we would rather forget.

Some days he would help us prepare meals in the kitchen, and by the time I was leaving to go home I would see him cursing police officers on the front lawn of the Church as they were cuffing him. Some days he would stretch our patience, while on other days he could be the most considerate person.

He taught me that no person can be boxed into a diagnosis, a system or a disease.

He is a good example of what happens to lost sheep when systems, governments, societies and churches fail them.

It is not very hard to find lost sheep; it can begin with a smile, a handshake or a warm cup of coffee.

A few weeks ago I flew down to Nashville to spend a week with Becca Stevens, the founder of Thistle Farms and the priest at St-Augustine's Chapel at Vanderbilt University. Just over twenty years ago she started Magdalene - a residential community made up of women who had survived prostitution, human trafficking and addiction. Today Magdalene and Thistle Farms employ more than 70 women who have survived horrific living situations for decades; many of them had been sold by their parents before the age of 10 years old and spent decades involved in prostitution, addiction and homelessness.

When I would ask them how they were able to get out of these difficult circumstances after so many years, they would always tell me that the unconditional love that was given to them by the other women of Thistle Farms is what got them to see the beauty that was within them. Thistle Farms is today one of the most relevant church ministries in North America, not just in radically changing the lives of women in Nashville, but also in recognizing that if it takes a

community to raise a person out of injustice, it also takes a community to put them there in the first place.

One of the biggest challenges facing our communities and the church today is the growing number of lost sheep. My hope has always been that the Church would be the unstoppable catalyst that would lead wider society in the mission of serving those who are less fortunate and lost. Unfortunately in most cases the Church has struggled to be a relevant force in enacting meaningful change in the realm of social justice.

The greatest tragedy the church faces today is the reality that we have forgotten that the good news is not for a privileged group but for everyone everywhere. Our churches have domesticated the Gospel and blunted its transformative power on both individuals and the state.

The church is by nature an extension of our broken communities, and in this they have often become places of racism, patriotism, where the love of work and money supersede all other considerations. As the theologian William Stringfellow noted in his groundbreaking books in the 1970's, 'Nothing seems more bewildering to a person outside the church about those inside the church than the contrast between how Christians behave in society and what Christians do in the sanctuary'.

What breaks my heart is those who have tried to become the catalyst of meaningful social change within the church have often been labelled dissenters. Because of this these visionary leaders have had to walk through the wilderness in absolute solitude.

Church leaders who have taken the road less travelled have had to struggle with the reality that they were more often than not unsupported by their denominations.

When my dad was young he was sent to a boarding school outside Paris called l'école des Roches. The school which was founded a few decades before the Second World War had many faculty who were of Huguenot backgrounds. One of the iconic families that worked at the school were the Trocmé's. They were a family devoted to radical justice and pacifism, and because of their unpopular views regarding the dangers of nationalism & patriotism, they were not well treated by their denomination : the reformed church of France, who made sure that over the years they were given the least attractive assignments in the church

despite the fact that they were most definitely the brighter minds of their generation.

André Trocmé, because of his strong views on the importance of social justice within the church and pacifism, found himself in relative exile in a small parish in the south east of France called le Chambon-sur-Lignon.

In the years that followed, France was invaded by the German army, and many of its Jews were deported to their death with the help of the French authorities. All across France the Church stood by as atrocities were committed by the Vichy government. However in le Chambon-sur-Lignon André Trocmé mobilised the entire community to help Jews that sought sanctuary. By the end of the war with the help of the entire village, his congregation saved over 5000 Jews (mostly children) from deportation and certain death. In the process André Trocmé lost his nephew Daniel who chose to die rather than to turn in the Jews that were being cared for by the Chambon-sur-Lignon community (read letter). He called the church to use ‘the weapons of the spirit’ to oppose the injustices that were taking place all across France.

Even today his sacrifice is not well known outside of Israel where following the war he was named (along with the entire village which is one of only 2 cases worldwide) a righteous among the nations.

The road that we are called to take as followers of Jesus Christ is a hard one, that is often unpopular in the eyes of the wider societies we make our homes in, and more often than not in our very own churches.

When I think of people like William Stringfellow and André Trocmé and their unwavering commitment to loving everyone everywhere, and yet never being truly supported by the church, I am saddened. The gospels call us to full inclusion in the body of Christ and yet we seem to struggle heavily with this difficult yet simple calling.

Often when I find myself tired and worn down with what the world throws at me week in and week out, I read this quote by Henry Nouwen (who after a brilliant career in academics spent the later part of his life in the L’Arche community in Richmond Hill, Ontario):

*“More and more, the desire grows in me simply to walk around, greet people, enter their homes, sit on their doorsteps, play ball, throw water, and be known as*

*someone who wants to live with them. It is a privilege to have the time to practice this simple ministry of presence. Still, it is not as simple as it seems. My own desire to be useful, to do something significant, or to be part of some impressive project is so strong that soon my time is taken up by meetings, conferences, study groups, and workshops that prevent me from walking the streets. It is difficult not to have plans, not to organize people around an urgent cause, and not to feel that you are working directly for social progress. But I wonder more and more if the first thing shouldn't be to know people by name, to eat and drink with them, to listen to their stories and tell your own, and to let them know with words, handshakes, and hugs that you do not simply like them, but truly love them."*

Without full inclusion within the Church, our words and deeds bear little value in the eyes of the wider society that we are part of. All our efforts will be in vain if we can not find it in our hearts to welcome the lost sheep into communities of unwavering love and support.

I am often reminded by my street friends who sleep on the sidewalks at night while I sleep comfortably in a loving home that the values and ethics that we preach in our churches are not repeated week after week to promote some abstract concepts, but to remind us that true obedience means full inclusion into the Body of Christ that God so loves.

The St-James Drop-In Centre, the organization and community that I have been part of for the past decade is a symbol of this unwavering love. Over the past decade we have walked alongside more than 200 men and women who have lost their way in homelessness, addiction and mental illness. Over the past 3 years our social enterprise, Streetsuds, which employs men and women who were homeless, has allowed 6 of our graduates to find meaningful employment and suitable housing while providing affordable and quality cleaning to shelters across the city. More importantly these brothers & sisters have shown me and many other people that ultimately love is the greatest force to enact true social change that will guide lost sheep home, and bring forth community that celebrates all its children. In the meantime we must continue to live and preach that theology that says that only through complete inclusion will true kingdom justice come.

***Readings:***

*1Corinthians 12*

*Unity and Diversity in the Body*

*12 Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one*

body, so it is with Christ. **13** For we were all baptised by[c] one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. **14** Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

**15** Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. **16** And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. **17** If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? **18** But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. **19** If they were all one part, where would the body be? **20** As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

**21** The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” **22** On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, **23** and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, **24** while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it, **25** so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. **26** If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.

**27** Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. **28** And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. **29** Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? **30** Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues[d]? Do all interpret? **31** Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.

#### *Romans 12 :15-18*

**15** Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. **16** Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.[a] Do not be conceited.

**17** Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. **18** If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.